



How to Serve on a [Church] Committee

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The invitation to join another committee can fill the church leader with dread! First, there is the horror of yet another night out in the month. Then, there is the usually unspecified extra work generated by sub-committees, special meetings, and AGM's. But you tell yourself, "Someone has to do it, right?" and, before you know it, you are sitting on yet another committee (or maybe your first!), whether it is a parish vestry, a diocesan committee, or a charitable trust.

Past experiences of committees may well add to your dread. Apart from the potential conflicts over the decisions to be made and the personalities involved, there is the lingering foreboding that committees by their very nature are highly inefficient at best and utterly unproductive at worst. American comedian, Fred Allen, described a committee as "a group of the unprepared, appointed by the unwilling to the unnecessary!" However, I would argue that this is a modern myth. The genius of the Christian church down through history has been its ability to meet together, argue a point and reach a consensus.

will vary with circumstance, but generally falls into two categories: a committee can either produce work, or provide oversight, or (usually) both together. Both these categories have their 'skill sets' and both are vital for a healthy organisation. But if you have ever sat of a committee feeling that you were simply 'rubber-stamping' decisions made by other people, you will know the difficulty of providing appropriate oversight. Since Church committees often involve this function, I would like to think further about this category.

You are sitting on a committee and a financial report has been tabled. What questions should you be asking yourself and your fellow committee members in regard to its contents? Believe it or not, a healthy and robust doctrine of human sin is essential. Unless you are aware of the ways in which sin can taint even our best efforts, you will fail to offer the due diligence that is required. In my view, organisations fail in four ways: Corruption, Incompetency, Complacency and Confusion. The role of an oversight committee is to be vigilant against these four organisational enemies.

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For example, the roots of the modern protestant missionary movement that over the last 200 years has transformed the face of world Christianity, could be characterised as beginning with a committee meeting in a pub, quill in hand, asking the question, "World evangelism. Where do we start?" Of course, it was more nuanced than that, but nevertheless the role of the committee as the engine of world evangelism is clear.

So, with that said, what is the role and function of a committee? Broadly speaking, the role of a committee is to provide a mechanism by which people can operate together collectively. Anyone can be a dictator, but to act collectively is the real exercise of power! The function of a committee

Corruption should shock us, but not come as a surprise. Corruption involves distorting the true picture of reality for undisclosed purposes and hidden agendas. It is a form of falsehood – either for personal gain or to influence a committee's decision. It thrives in dark corners created by lack of information and inadequate explanations. The remedy is for the committee to aim for transparency in the information provided and satisfactory answers to all their questions. Do we have all the information we need? Are all the explanations given sound? A sure sign of a dysfunctional committee is silence!

Incompetency can strike at any time. Are we in over our heads? Are the people engaged in this ministry up to the task? Incompetency can be the result of conceit or pride, as in when people have an over-inflated understanding of their own abilities. But it can also be the product of under-resourcing and inadequate training on otherwise hard-working and diligent people. To expect people to perform tasks for which they are not qualified is simply not fair. Incompetence is not the same as making a mistakes, it's the failure to learn from the mistakes made. As well as adequate resourcing and good training, incompetency is also mitigated by good job descriptions and employment policies. Yet it often goes undiagnosed, particularly when friends or volunteers are involved.

Complacency does not involve a lack of skill, but a lack of urgency. It is a form of sloth and is very difficult to identify or counter. But complacency can really cripple an organisation and prevent things being done in a timely manner. Ironically, complacency is often covered over with the excuse of being too busy, whether it's a particular busy week or over-work in general. That maybe so, and issues of under-resourcing and prioritisation may then need to be addressed. The broader question is whether organisational priorities are being addressed with a commensurate level of urgency. Of course, deadlines can be set and priorities clearly stated, but you can lead a horse to water... – as I say, it is very difficult for a committee to combat this kind of organisational failing without falling into the trap of micro-management!

The last of my four organisational failings is Confusion. By 'confusion', I am thinking of the lack of clarity that can develop around the aims and objectives of an organisation. In some ways confusion is really just the fruit of the previous

three failings: when an organisation suffers from corruption, incompetency and complacency, then confusion will reign! At this point a committee needs to return to its mission and values statements, and its strategic plans. The exercise involved in producing such documents is at least as important as the resulting print-out, for it brings an improved focus to the committee's work. The committee needs to ask itself, "Is this organisation clear about its overall goals? Are tasks involved being prioritised against clear organisational objectives? Are we doing the basics well?"

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So, at your next committee meeting don't just sit there in silence, meekly rubber-stamping all that is tabled. Keep in mind the four C's – corruption, (in)competency, complacency and confusion. A doctrine of human sin should not lead simply to being pessimistic and deeply suspicious of everything that is done. Rather, knowing that we can never be entirely free from the effects of our fallen natures, we are instead freed by God's grace to be delighted, surprised, and thankful for all the work done for which we have oversight. That is way the business of a committee should be undergirded by prayer. Just as all the best of gardens need careful and regular weeding, so too good governance can, by God's grace, bring the very freedom an organisation needs to flourish in life-giving ways.